

## **Letter from the Chairman**

We are witnessing - and indeed we are all a part of - history in the making! We have the privilege of living through a fairly tumultuous period of change that will be discussed, analyzed, deliberated, documented and portrayed from a variety of perspectives for generations to come! There has been widespread civil unrest across our nation following a number of recent deaths of African Americans and other people of color while interfacing with the front end of our criminal justice system. These incidents have evoked a range of public reactions including anger, sadness, disgust, and fear. As a result, the level of grassroots activism we are witnessing now is reminiscent of that during the civil rights era which eventually led to major shifts in public opinion, corporate policy, and legal precedent that improved how the systemically disenfranchised were treated in our society. A similar opportunity is before us now. However, as has happened in the past, those of us living through these times of social and political turbulence are at a distinct disadvantage in appreciating the potential long-term impact of this moment in history. It is with this historical perspective that I urge everyone to take some definitive action, individually or as part of a group, to further our local efforts toward criminal justice system reform that is very much needed and long-overdue in our community.

Concurrent with this extraordinary period of activism, we are living through an ongoing public health crisis that has compelled our governmental authorities to impose restrictions on many of the personal freedoms that the vast majority of Americans have taken for granted over their lifetimes. Limitations on individual movement, the compulsory use of protective accessories and the mandates of social distancing have provided everyday citizens a rare opportunity to experience the legal barriers, social isolation, and personal annoyances that people with criminal records have had to tolerate on a daily basis for years at a time...with no end in sight! This has provided the more sensitive among us a unique glimpse of what it must be like to be an “ex-offender” in our society. After years of these unrelenting social restrictions, coupled with other numerous citizenship rights restrictions, it’s not so hard to understand why so many formerly incarcerated people have just given up on the “American Dream.” Thus, if any jurisdiction or prisoner reentry planning group intends to improve the long-term outcomes of persons who have “paid their debt to society”, it must not only address the social service and community resource barriers that tend to dominate reentry discussions; but it must also acknowledge, and make appropriate policy accommodations for, the growing number of “returning citizens” who have become cynical, distrustful and increasingly hopeless over time.

Finally, I must clearly state that this SIM Reentry Community Collaborations Committee report is not intended to directly address these complicated psychosocial, political and public policy issues. Its recommendations do, however, represent a step in the right direction for the correctional services section of the criminal justice system. But this can only happen if each one of us does our part to mitigate the racial and socioeconomic discrimination that exists in the system as a whole. By taking some action, you join a growing segment of our community determined to be part of the solution during this unusual period of change in our society. If we do not take advantage of this opportunity now, we could miss this unique period in history that will not come again during our lifetime. It is in this context that I pose this question to everyone who reads this report: What will you do – as a criminal justice worker, governmental representative, elected official, corporate partner, citizen, or person formerly incarcerated – to encourage improvements in our criminal justice system that are aligned with our broader community efforts toward a more just, equitable and inclusive society? But now let’s turn our attention to the primary purpose of this report, which is to answer this urgent question: What can we do - as stakeholders in the quality of life in Hillsborough County - to create a more proactive, data-driven, and collaborative approach to reentry?

Thanks again to all our committee members and special guest presenters who contributed to this effort!

Craig Powell, Chair